

Raising the bar on school bus safety

Kids are safe in collisions, other drivers at risk

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (WOOD) - The crash that killed a Coopersville teenage brother and sister on Wednesday raised questions about the construction of school buses and whether they increase the risk of fatality for drivers who strike the buses.

Bruce Privacky, 16, and his 13-year-old sister Toni were killed instantly when their Subaru slammed into the back of a Coopersville school bus, becoming lodged under the back end.



The Subaru failed to stop when the bus put on its flashing lights and came to a complete stop. It is not yet clear why the Subaru failed to stop.

School buses are built to protect bus riders. They are intentionally built to be far off the ground, away from traffic. The design seems to be working. Bus experts say there are typically no more than 11 fatalities of children in buses each year.

"This is a vehicle designed to protect the children inside," Gary Bubar of the Michigan Association for Pupil Transportation told 24 Hour News 8 in a phone interview on Thursday.

That is not the case for the vehicle that collides into the bus.

"A school bus is nothing more than a modified truck," said Art Yeager of the Center for Auto Safety.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there were 1,386 fatalities in accidents involving school buses between 2000 and 2009. Of those fatalities, 72% were the occupants of the other vehicles.

Hitting a stopped or stopping bus appears to be not uncommon -- 24 Hour News 8 has covered at least two accidents of that type since 2009 in West Michigan. In both cases, the drivers survived.

But one school bus collision in Ionia in 2009 involved a pickup raised higher from the ground than a sedan. Investigators say the driver of the pickup survived because she ducked down to pick up her cell phone when she crashed.

Car safety advocates say buses need a rear safety bar like the kind semi-trucks are required to have.

Trucker Todd Stewart remembers when a family in a car going 60 miles an hour hit his rig. It was stopped by the rear safety bar. "The front of the car was completely crushed. The legs were pinned underneath, but they're still alive," said Stewart.

Stewart thinks the steel bar is a vital safety feature.

"For a lot of situations, it could be the difference between life and death," he said.

School transportation officials aren't completely sold on adding the bar.

"If it would increase the safety of other drivers, then it's worth considering," said Bubar. "But again, one would have to look at the data and the testing to determine if that's the best ways to do it."

Car safety advocates said reluctance could be for another reason:

"If I were to guess, I would say they don't want to spend the money for it because there is no logical reason not to [add the bar]," said Yeager.

And taxpayers may not be willing to pay for the additions.

The school bus industry said there could be other ways than installing steel bars to make buses more visible from the back, but auto safety advocates say none of it will stop a car when a driver is distracted.

